

Dilemma of Calling Gandhi a Mahatma



Satish Bhandari

Dilemma of Calling

Mohan Das Karam Chand Gandhi a Mahatma

Some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust on them, Gandhi was certainly not born great, he achieved greatness and later on more of that greatness was heaped on him. We must understand what he stood for and what he achieved. The reader is acquainted with him as he is on currency notes of India, main thorough fares of many cities bear his name and 2nd October has been a holiday since long.

Gandhi, as a young man was struggling to establish himself as a lawyer. He found no suitable opening somewhat like the present scene now prevailing in West Bengal. He was lucky to get an assignment to plead a case in South Africa. He was familiar with the harshness of untouchability in Hindu society but he himself was from the Bania class who rank higher. In Africa, he was treated as a colored Asian. Since apartheid was being practiced all around, he was treated badly, frequently ignored, not offered a seat and not allowed to travel with the 'whites' even when he had a valid ticket to a journey by train. He noticed the gross injustice being done to the Asians and

identified himself with them and shared their resentment. Kick a worm crawling on the ground and see even the worm turns!

I propose to go over to his beliefs and his attempts at twisting his own vows to give a new meaning to them. Gandhi professed that he had a deep faith in God and His justice. In an attempt to defeat God's will, he took a life insurance policy to protect his family in case he died suddenly; this showed that his faith in God was superficial. His attention was drawn to this gap between his belief and action; Gandhi allowed the policy to lapse. He started experimenting with vegetarian diet and vowed to give up milk because cruel means were adopted to extract even the last drop through the 'phooka' process. He fell sick and was advised to drink milk. He did not want to break his vow and argued within himself that when he had taken the vow, he had only cows and buffalos in mind; goat was not in his mind, so he could drink goat milk without breaking the vows. In Mahabharata, an elephant as well as a son of Guru Dronacharya were namesakes. When Dronacharya was full of fury in the battle field and was unstoppable, Yudhishtira, the most truthful of the Pandavs, informed him, "Ashwasthama hato, nara wa kunjro wa" (Ashwasthama has been killed whether the man or the elephant) and the second part of the statement was drowned in the noise of the drum

beats. Dronacharya believed that his son Ashwasthama had been killed; he lost his concentration and mental poise and he was quickly defeated. Was it all fair when the war was being fought on high moral grounds?

Gandhi started study of the Gita and found it as the best guide to lead a spiritual life. The words Aparigraha (non-possession) and Sambhava (equitability) gripped his mind. Aparigraha means that those who seek the spiritual path must handle their wealth as a trustee; having full control over it but not regard it as personal property like the bank cashier. Emperor Aurangzeb copied the Quran in his own hand and sold these copies to make a living because he held the revenue of his Government as a trustee and had no right to use it for his own household expenses. Non-possession and equitability presuppose a change of heart, a change of attitude. Good deeds bring approbation and praise, wicked deeds deserve disapprobation. The doer of the deed deserves respect or pity. Hate the sin but not the sinner; this precept is easy to understand but difficult to practice. The good of an individual is encompassed in the good of all; no separate personal request is necessary. Every profession has respectability; a barber and a lawyer are on equal footing. Ruskin's book, "Unto this Last" is a great equalizer.

Gandhi was convinced that children must be educated through their mother tongue. He believed that Indian parents who teach their children English from infancy betray their children and the country by depriving them of the social and spiritual heritage of the nation and render them unfit for the service of the country. Jyoti Basu, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, abolished the teaching of English to do justice to these children. As an atheist, he was not worried about their spiritual heritage. This abolition led to poor command on language and the students failed to compete in Union Public Service Commission competition for senior IAS/IPS jobs. Gandhi strongly held that service of the family would be inconsistent with the service of the nation. He ignored the education of his children and stands accused of failing in his duty as their father. He was enthused by 'Brahmacharya' and started practicing it. It is rumored that he wanted to test if he had developed full self-control and experimented by sleeping naked with young girls. I do not know the result of this experiment.

Gandhi never sought any post or position, amassed no wealth and left no inheritance. He dedicated his life for the service of the country. His greatness lies in discovering Satyagraha as a weapon against the British rulers. Well, this Satyagraha was not really a new concept, it was

called passive resistance by others. He was the one who put it to a new use. It was the ultimate form of non-cooperation. Innovators have always been victorious. Digging a trench was an unremarkable act but Prophet Muhammad dug a trench when the army from Mecca was planning their attack. None had thought of the trench as a defensive device. In spite of their strength and determination, the Meccans had no success. The Arabs as an innovation added the stirrup to the saddle and their horsemen became more secure on the horseback; they conquered the entire Middle East and large parts of Africa and Europe. Genghis Khan modified the deployment of troops; he preferred pincer movement to out-flank the opponent. The enemy soon found himself as if in a nut cracker and suffered heavy losses. Genghis Khan's army spread havoc wherever he went. USA made the atom bomb and brought Japan to its knees.

Gandhi 'Satyagraha' was a unique weapon. The frequent law violation movements brought about a keen awareness among the masses but an unseen consequence is that the people lost fear of authority and jails; we are still struggling to find acceptable methods to control the Satyagrahis. The novelty of non-violent protests and strikes made it difficult to counter him. General Dyer massacred many in Jallianwala Bag and carried

the stigma to his grave. Gandhi was convinced that it was essential that a Satyagrahi must have a pure heart free from malice, desire and wickedness. He applied all his energy in purifying his heart. Since the food has an impact on the mind, some foods must be shunned. Carnal thoughts were to be eliminated and the satisfaction of the palate or taste were a strict no, only simple wholesome fruits, nuts and non-spicy meals was to be taken. He started fasting and strict diet control. His wife, Kasturba, was advised to give up salt altogether; she could not think of eating such bland food and challenged Gandhi to do so. Gandhi accepted the challenge cheerfully and gave up salt for many years. Gandhi confesses 'a mind consciously unclean cannot be cleansed by fasting. Intense self-examination, surrender to God and lastly His grace was essential; there is an intimate connection between the mind and the body.' Fasting and similar discipline are the means to achieve self-restraint but the physical fasting must be accompanied by mental fasting; otherwise the experiment will end in disaster and hypocrisy. Any service rendered without humility is merely selfishness and egotism. A man who is swayed by passions may have good intentions, may be truthful in word but he shall never find the truth. Ralph Wald Emerson has suggested in a

cryptic way that truth is never simple, reality obscures it.

Gandhi had been decorated by the London Govt. for his contribution during the Boer war and the Zulu rebellion. When the war broke out in 1914, Gandhi offered his services to the British Government to raise men and material. Helping the British instead of giving them a hard kick to oust them was simply reprehensible. This brought about a charge of inconsistency, even hypocrisy against him. A votary of Ahimsa was offering services to an alien Government! Ahimsa is a great concept; but the very act of living – eating, drinking and walking- has elements of violence. No wonder the Jains carefully cover their mouth to ensure that no insect gets into it and get killed; they sweep the ground ahead before stepping over it to ensure no ant gets crushed under their feet. Gandhi believed that there can never be a war that will end all wars in future. Reconciliation and not victory would be a better choice. He never aimed to defeat his opponent, he wanted to win him over. If the agitation launched on his call became violent, he would not hesitate to withdraw the call and regret for starting it. He would readily admit a mistake if things did not go as he had visualized.

A tremendous wave of liberalism was passing over English politics and literature in the 19th century. Indians who had been exposed to English language imbibed the spirit of democracy

and national patriotism. Promotion of these sentiments was deliberately encouraged by the liberal leadership of Britain as a matter of policy towards India. It was viewed as the white man's burden to civilize the savages and backwards. The Parliamentary Committee of 1833 reiterated that the interests of the native subjects are to be protected in preference to those of Europeans whenever the two come in competition. After the mutiny of 1857, Queen's Proclamation of 1858 declared that, "We hold ourselves bound to the natives of Indian territories by the same obligations of duty which bind us to all our other subjects." The Queen's declaration was believed in good faith and her sense of justice and fair play was laudable.

The Indians were confident that if they could make out a good case and present it properly, the British liberals would concede their just demands. Hopes ran high and the first concrete demand was for a larger share of jobs in the Civil Service. The Civil Service was the "steel frame" of British administration. There was great reluctance to admit Indians in large numbers to this elite service. Surendranath Banerjea, a resident of Bengal, had qualified for ICS but his name was removed from the list and he was not appointed. There was a writ of Mandamus in the Queen's Bench and ultimately the name had to be restored and Banerjea was appointed to the ICS. The justice was done but soon after, he was dismissed from the Service on

flimsy grounds and the dismissal was seen as vindictive action. The passive discontent among the Indians changed into active agitation slowly. This Banerjea played an historic role in independence movement. He took to public life and founded the Indian Association to organize agitations all over and this movement became the precursor to the formation of the Indian National Congress.

Allan Octavian Hume, a retired civil servant, heard the Governor General Lord Dufferin expressing the need for a responsible organization through which the Government might ascertain the wishes of the people. Hume came forward and offered to fill the vacuum. In 1883, he invited graduates of Calcutta University to organize an association for the mental, moral, social and political regeneration of India. The first meeting of this association was held at Bombay during the Xmas week of 1885 under the Presidency of a Bengali barrister Mr. W C Bonnerjee. The Government looked at the Congress with favor; the members were invited to garden parties by Lord Dufferin and there was an air of goodwill. Surendranath Banerjea merged his own organization into the newly formed Congress. The bonhomie did not last long. Lord Dufferin expressed disapproval of its policies. The officials withdrew themselves and the resolutions of the Congress evoked no response. This gap widened and the Congress became a pain in the neck.

In 1915, Gandhi returned to India. Was his return according to some British plan? Was he called to control the pain in the neck? Was there some private undeclared understanding or some underhand benefit? Was he was being planted by the British Government to control the Indian National Congress, hijack their program and subvert their plans? It could be their master stroke. He could be a stooge or a hatchet man of the British although collaborators sometimes betray. Indira Gandhi had created Bhindranwale as the hatchet man of the Congress although he turned into a Frankenstein. USA had created the Taliban (students) to contain Russians in Afghanistan and now fail to control them. The tide turns; even if he was planted by the British, Gandhi could not maintain the façade of friendship although he kept on telling his supporters that we must first deserve, then desire. Many others wanted independence faster.

Gandhi had realized that he had the support of only a small section of Muslim population. He became desperate to win them over. A shepherd is not thinking of the ninety-nine sheep in the pen, he puts in all effort and energy to bring in the 100th outside. What concession could he offer? The Muslims had already squeezed and extracted every benefit. In the First World War the Turkish-Palestine Front collapsed in 1918 and Kemal Ataturk abolished the Caliphate in 1924. The Muslims were greatly agitated and wanted the

restoration of the Caliphate. It was an illogical demand. The Caliphate had lost power and was a paper-tiger only with a medieval outlook. Its restoration would be a retrograde step. Jinnah did not support this demand. Gandhi realized that it was 'one in a century' chance to win over the Muslims; he wasted no time and promptly supported the demand. He was a demagogue determined to win over everyone. If he could make the Muslims follow him, there would be no partition.

Gandhi continued to proclaim his religious leanings and to establish Ram Rajya. He made continuous efforts to search for the truth. No labels could confound him. He could see through a façade much before others could suspect anything. He was a past master in taking politically correct decisions. He insisted that the partition of the country could be only over his dead body. He was willing to overlook the faults in others. His proverbial three monkeys saw no evil, spoke no evil and heard no evil. He continued to sing in chorus, 'Ishwar Allah terey naam' although the attributes of these Gods differ as chalk and cheese. While a vast majority regarded Gandhi as a saint, Churchill whispered that Gandhi was the most cunning politician he had ever met. In personal life, Gandhi was indeed a saint. He amassed no wealth and asked for no favors. As Bapu, all children of India were his own. He never

entertained the idea of promoting kinship (Bhai-Bhatijabad).

Leaders of the Congress were in a hurry to come to power, in their haste they never noticed that Jinnah was a sick man nearing his death. If they had waited, there would have been another leader in his place. They agreed to Jinnah's demand for partition. It was Gandhi alone who was resisting and Gandhi failed at the most crucial moment and surrendered before the combined might of the Congress leadership. He had always been an enigma; he had groomed Nehru as his political heir. With hind-sight, his choice of Nehru over Patel was another blunder.

In 1947, the partition of the British Indian Empire led to the creation of India and Pakistan. The division of national assets among the two nations was to be mainly on the basis of the population and the ratio of 4:1 was agreed upon. Seventy-five crore was to be paid. The Government of India released Rs.20 crore with a view to pay the balance a little later. The invasion of Kashmir by self-styled liberators with the covert support of the Pakistani Army took place at this juncture. Government of India decided to withhold payment of the balance amount. Lord Mountbatten's view was that withholding payment amounted to a violation of the mutually agreed conditions. He brought it to the notice of Gandhi. The policy of tit for tat was repugnant to Gandhi's

ethical sense and he readily agreed with the Viceroy's point of view.

There was rioting and disturbances all over the country near the time of partition. Gandhi had returned from Calcutta in September 1947 to go to Punjab to restore peace there. Sardar Patel briefed him about the explosive situation in Delhi itself and Gandhi changed his plans and decided to stay put in Delhi to restore peace with the firm determination. He went on fast with a view to restoring communal amity in Delhi. This fast had no link with the division of assets but a quirk of fate or an intentional mix-up distorted the facts of contemporary history. The word spread that Gandhi had gone on fast to coerce the Govt. to pay 55 crore to Pakistan. The arrival of Pakistani Hindu refugees and their narration of the stories of the looting and killings, abduction and rape of their women incited the local Hindus. Pakistani Muslims received similar reports of atrocities on their co-religionists in India. Delhi became cauldron on fire. Revenge was on the lips of both the communities. This resulted in killings, molestation, torching of houses and properties after getting freedom so peacefully!

Gandhi was deeply anguished. India was in a great upheaval and Gandhi went on fast. The critics of Mahatma Gandhi linked the decision of the Government to disburse Rs 55 crores to his fast. Gandhi was greatly misunderstood for

espousing the cause of Muslims; great men are almost always misunderstood. Sadly, this 'once in a millennium' great life ended when Nathu Ram Godse put a bullet through this frail body when Gandhi came to the Mandir to recite his pet make-belief song 'Ishwar Allah terey naam' in the evening prayers. Although the great man's life ended, the farce spread in the evening prayers still continues. Ideas do not end with bullets; they can be defeated only by new ideas and intellect. Pen is mightier than the sword. Even in the end, Gandhi left behind a controversy. When he was shot there were many persons around him and the assailant made no attempt to escape. Gandhi's last words vouched by many are 'Hey Ram' but there are a few who claim to have heard 'Harambee' (bastard). Godse admits that the ostensible reason for the fast was the Hindu-Muslim unity but he suspected that there was the hidden agenda of coercing the Govt. to pay 55 crores. He recalled the appeasement, concessions and mollicoddling of the Muslims over the past 32 years; Gandhi appeared to be behind every favor.

Nathuram Godse's final statement (unedited)

On January 13, 1948, I learnt that Gandhi had decided to go on fast unto death. The reason given was that he wanted an assurance of Hindu-Muslim Unity but I and many others could easily see that the real motive [was] to compel the Dominion Government to pay the sum of Rs. 55 crores to Pakistan, (although the payment had been withheld by the Government). It was evident to my mind that the force of public opinion was nothing but a trifle when compared with the leanings of Gandhi favorable to Pakistan. In 1946 or thereabout, Muslim atrocities perpetrated on Hindus under the patronage of Surhawardy Government in Noakhali (Bengal) made our blood boil. Our shame and indignation knew no bounds (but) ideals of truth and non-violence (which) he ostentatiously paraded before the country. I could never conceive that an armed resistance to the aggressor is unjust. Ram killed Ravan in a big fight; Krishna killed Kansa to end his wickedness. In condemning Shivaji, Rana Pratap and Guru Govind Singh as misguided patriots, Gandhi has merely exposed his self-conceit. Gandhi was, paradoxically, a violent pacifist who brought untold calamities on the country in the name of truth and non-violence, while Rana Pratap, Shivaji and the Guru Govind will remain enshrined in the hearts of their countrymen forever. By 1919,

Gandhi had become desperate in his endeavor to get the Muslims to trust him and went from one absurd promise to another. He backed the Khilafat movement in this country and was able to enlist the full support of the National Congress for that policy. Soon the Moplah Rebellion (Kerala) showed that the Muslims had not the slightest idea of national unity. There followed a slaughter of Hindus. The British Government, entirely unmoved, suppressed the rebellion in a few months and left to Gandhi the joy of his Hindu-Muslim Unity. British Imperialism emerged stronger, the Muslims turned more fanatical and the consequences were visited on the Hindus as suffering.

The accumulating provocation of 32 years, culminating in his last pro-Muslim fast, at last goaded me to the conclusion that the existence of Gandhi should be brought to an end immediately. He had developed a subjective mentality under which he alone was the final judge of what was right or wrong. Either Congress had to surrender its will to him and play second fiddle to all his eccentricity, whimsicality or it had to carry on without him. He was the master guiding the civil disobedience movement. The movement may succeed or fail; it may bring untold disasters and political reverses, but that could make no difference to the Mahatma's infallibility. These childish inanities and obstinacies, coupled with a most severe austerity of life, ceaseless work and lofty character, made Gandhi formidable and

irresistible. In a position of such absolute irresponsibility, Gandhi was guilty of blunder after blunder. The Mahatma even supported the separation of Sindh from the Bombay Presidency and threw the Hindus of Sindh to the communal wolves. Numerous riots took place in Karachi, Sukkur, Shikarpur and other places in which the Hindus were the only sufferers. From August 1946 onwards, the private armies of the Muslim League began a massacre of the Hindus. Hindu blood began to flow from Bengal to Karachi with mild reactions in the Deccan. The Interim government formed in September was sabotaged by its Muslim League members, the more they became disloyal and treasonable to the government of which they were a part, the greater was Gandhi infatuation for them. The Congress, which had boasted of its nationalism and socialism, secretly accepted Pakistan and abjectly surrendered to Jinnah. India was vivisected and one-third of the Indian territory became foreign land to us. This is what Gandhi had achieved after 30 years of undisputed dictatorship, and this is what Congress party calls freedom. One of the conditions imposed by Gandhi for his breaking of the fast unto death related to the vacation of mosques in Delhi occupied by Hindu refugees. But when Hindus in Pakistan were subjected to violent attacks, he did not so much as utter a single word to protest and censure the Pakistan government. Gandhi is being referred to as the Father of the Nation. But if that is so, he had failed his paternal duty inasmuch as he has acted

very treacherously to the nation by his consenting to the partition. The people of this country were eager and vehement in their opposition to Pakistan. But Gandhi played false with the people. (I know) I shall be totally ruined, and the only thing I could expect from the people would be nothing but hatred if I were to kill Gandhi. But at the same time, I felt that Indian politics, in the absence of Gandhi, would surely be more practical, able to retaliate, and have powerful armed forces. No doubt, my own future would be totally ruined, but the nation would be saved from the inroads of Pakistan. I do say that my shots were fired at the person whose policy and action had brought rack and ruin and destruction to millions of Hindus. There was no legal machinery by which such an offender could be brought to book, and for this reason I fired those fatal shots. I do not desire any mercy to be shown to me. I did fire shots at Gandhi in open daylight. I did not make any attempt to run away; in fact, I never entertained any idea of running away. I did not try to shoot myself for it was my ardent desire to give vent to my thoughts in an open Court. My confidence about the moral side of my action has not been shaken even by the criticism leveled against it on all sides. I have no doubt that honest writers of history will weigh my act and find the true value thereof some day in future.

Nathuram Godse